

Column | *Attorney Wellness*

Perspective On Trial Attorney Mental Wellness

BY MICHAEL K. HURST AND CHELSEA TILL

The life of a trial lawyer is an emotional tidal flux that can bring great rewards and euphoric feelings when the tide is high, but can also carry struggles for validation and worth when the tide recedes.

Because of this constant flux, all lawyers, but especially trial lawyers, face unique challenges when it comes to mental health. We have the obvious causes—like long hours and time away from family and friends. But there are unique challenges too—like the real lack of control that comes with being in the courtroom. We are generally at the mercy of judges regarding scheduling and rulings, and face the real or perceived pressures of meeting the expectations of our clients and part-

ners. Then there's the reality that for the duration of a litigation matter you are in a literal fight—tensions are high and your guard is up. Factor in that we are competitive, intense, and high-performing individuals with brains that never turn off, and you've got a recipe for stress.

It's no surprise that trial attorneys have some of the highest rates of depression, anxiety, and stress among lawyers, and that collectively lawyers are three to five times more likely to struggle with these issues compared to the general population.

But it doesn't always have to be that way.

The nature of the job isn't going to change, but we can do things to help calm the waters, enjoy the horizon, and avoid many of the tidal waves.

From Michael: Like most of us, I have experienced pronounced tidal waves in my personal and professional life—the highs of winning big trials, landing important clients, and feeling like I've made a difference, but also losing sleep on cases that didn't go my way or feeling that I disappointed a client or colleague.

After more than three decades of practice, I have learned that the one word that sums up how to manage the constant tides is "control." The more of it we have, the better the chance to command our mental health. We can't control the decisions of others or the law for any particular case, but we can control our preparation, our perspective, our attitude, and our self-care.

Focusing on what I can control keeps things balanced when things get hard in either my personal or professional life. That includes having discernment on the colleagues and clients with whom I work—avoiding people who bring negativity to my life. I can control what I do first thing in the morning: prayer, gratitude, a good deed, checking on a friend, martial arts, and pursuing a plan of productivity for the day. That sets my day up for success. Even when times are dark in my personal life, for every hearing, trial, deposition, and team meeting, my message to myself and others is "have fun" and strive to make that difference.

From Chelsea: As an associate, one of the most difficult challenges I have faced is managing my relationships with partners while simultaneously setting boundaries and carving out time to ensure I am primed to deliver my

best work. As a young associate, I often felt a tension between being a "go-to" associate and taking the time to take care of myself. Somewhere along the line, most of us bought into the lie that we can't be excellent attorneys if we set reasonable boundaries. But that isn't true.

Taking care of ourselves is what enables us to be excellent attorneys. Some of the best advice I've received is to list the things that really matter to me and then list the *only* circumstances where I'm willing to sacrifice on those things. This simplifies the decision-making process for managing my priorities and safeguarding my personal life. For example, there are certain things in my life (like church, my weekly networking golf league, and going to the gym before work) that I promise myself I will not miss unless I'm in trial, out of town, or a *true* (not a perceived) emergency arises.

Having this non-negotiable framework helps me avoid the temptation of sacrificing personal priorities when work gets busy. While holding firm to these boundaries initially felt scary, over time I've seen that I can manage them without any real consequences to my work or client service. Even better, I have seen firsthand the personal benefits—I am not only happier and more balanced, but it helps ensure I am at my very best when it comes time for trial and the long hours that come with it!

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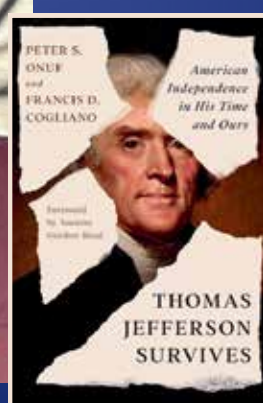
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Program: 4:00 - 5:00 PM
Reception: 5:00 - 6:00 PM
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MCLE: 1.00
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- Jeff Karcher, Texas Stock Exchange

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Speakers:

- Francis D. Cogliano, University of Edinburgh
 - Peter S. Onuf, Thomas Jefferson Professor of History Emeritus, University of Virginia
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Wednesday, July 1 at Noon

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